Bookreview: Publics and the city. By Kurt Iveson. Oxford: Blackwell 2007. ISBN: 9781405127301

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Publics and the city. By Kurt Iveson. Oxford: Blackwell. 2007. 252 pp. £24.99 paperback. ISBN: 9781405127301.

There have been times over the past few years when I have despaired of reading or hearing anything on public space which might move the discussion beyond hackneyed debates, in which we are told that public space is dying and needs to be saved from the forces that threaten to emaciate its capacity to act as a democratic forum. Too often in such debates, the 'streets' are privileged as spaces of sociability, with revanchist politicians and planners accused of undermining the social and cultural value of public spaces by dedicating them to a narrow range of consumer-oriented practices. Counter-arguments – that the streets have never been truly open or accessible to all – are duly trotted out, not least from feminist urbanists who point to the inherent masculinity of the public sphere and its inability to embrace gender difference. Caught in a theoretical impasse, debates about public space circle endlessly, becoming ever more self-referential and less relevant to cities where the internet now rivals the streets' role as a space of dialogue and sociality.

Thankfully, Kurt Iveson has arrived at similar conclusions. Part of the RGS-IBG Book Series, *Publics and the city* is a wide-ranging but empirically grounded consideration of the relationship between publicity and the city. Beginning with the assertion that topographical definitions of public space are severely limited as a basis for exploring issues pertaining to the 'public city', Iveson instead takes a perspective that focuses on issues of publicness and public address. Here, Iveson takes the latter to constitute the processes of addressing 'horizons of strangers', and hence seeks to explore the importance of particular urban sites as spaces where 'scenes of circulation' are established. Reworking Habermas, Young, and Fraser et al., Iveson refines notions of the 'public sphere' to move beyond questions of access and consider the affordances and constraints that might be associated with using a site as a venue of public address. At the same time, Iveson acknowledges the importance of the city as an object of public address, and argues that particular individuals and groups may make major gains by questioning the expectations of whom may be addressed (and how) in different urban sites.

This given, Iveson recognizes the importance of established imaginings of 'the public city' in the 'struggle to make space', and three of his case studies explore how different groups have sought to produce and sustain forms of public address by making particular sites the object of debate. The three chapters on the use of the Parliamentary Precinct in Canberra, public sex environments in Melbourne and graffiti-writing practices in Sydney thus offer nuanced accounts of the ways in which *tactical* appropriations of space may make *strategic* claims about the publicness of particular sites. In contrast, two chapters explore the ways in which normative ideas about unacceptable conduct in 'public space' have been used to justify the exclusion of particular groups from specific urban sites. Both the chapter on the struggle over McIver's Baths in Sydney and that on the 'neoliberal' policing of Perth's city centre offer balanced accounts in which the claims of counterpublics about their rights to the city are carefully scrutinized, with Iveson arguing that in some cases, exclusions can be justified. In such ways, he moves away from cosy notions that the city must constitute a 'being together of strangers', and acknowledges that his own vision of the city is about particular

forms of publicness that others may not share. This underlines that when talking about public space, geographers are always and inevitably working with a specific notion of what the public city is – one that may or may not resonate with the concerns of others who are engaged in struggles for the city.

Iveson's book hence moves the debate on public space forward in a significant manner and will certainly be of interest to all geographers and urbanists for whom the life of the street holds fascination. Even those who find debates on public space somewhat arid should enjoy this book's lively range of examples. Drawn from across Australia, the case studies that Iveson presents are carefully nuanced and engage critically with ongoing debates in social and cultural geography about the making of gender, racial, age and sexual identities. Issues of aboriginal rights, youth countercultural expression, sexual citizenship and the gendering of space are flagged up by the varied case study chapters, meaning that there are multiple points of entry for those for whom public space *per se* is not a prime concern. This given, Iveson clearly demonstrates why issues of publicness should be of concern to all geographers, and he suggests that there is too much at stake to accept existing normative assumptions about the decline of the public sphere. Provocative and passionate, the fact that the book is laced with humour will also surely endear it to a student audience. For such reasons, *Publics and the city* is highly recommended both as a primer on public space as well as a state of the art intervention in debates on the 'struggle for space'.

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The politics of life itself: biomedicine, power, and subjectivity in the twenty-first century. By Nikolas Rose. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 2006. $25.95/£14.95. ISBN: 9780691121918.

In the classic analyses of Foucault, the 18th and 19th centuries saw the emergence of a biopolitical state, in which the very vitality of individual citizens came to be the subject of systems of management (through state provision for health and welfare, for example). Such a politics centred on the human body is today being reconfigured, claims the sociologist Nikolas Rose, in his new book *The Politics of life itself*. To summarize brutally, new ways of understanding life have resulted in new forms of managing, shaping and contesting it. Thus, vital politics today, Rose suggests, 'is concerned with our growing capacities to control, manage, engineer, reshape, and modulate the very vital capacities of human beings as living creatures' (p. 3). There is much to admire in his account of the forms that such a politics is taking, and I would encourage the reader to engage with this work. But two aspects of Rose's account warrant brief commentary.

First, both life and politics are given, in my view, too narrow a definition in this book. Central to what Rose seeks to analyse, for example, is the emergence of a particular 'style of thought' – drawing on Ludwig Fleck's phrase – based upon a shift in the scale at which we think to understand, act on, and act in relation to, human life: from a clinical gaze centred upon the body, to a molecular gaze that understands life at the level of its component